



The boycott became a siege, the terrorism Qatar supports turned into freedoms of belief and expression and the violence it condones turned into human rights.

By playing this game, Qatar grabbed the attention of many countries that either have significant economic interests with Qatar or in which Qatar has established mechanisms for economic and media influence.

In this game of cat and mouse, Qatar enlisted the professional assistance of well-known public relations firms and experts. They advised it to keep playing the international card as much as possible and to avoid addressing the regional concerns in which the boycotting countries have clear advantages capable of destroying Qatar's distorted logic.

By keeping to the international arena, Qatar has more freedom of movement than the four boycotting countries and can thus quickly react and bog the crisis down with irrelevant issues.

Qatar showed a great deal of skill in trying to win over international public opinion essentially by distorting words and messages.

From the beginning of the crisis, Qatar tried to dampen the initial blow of the boycott to divert from the main issues of the crisis by veering towards irrelevant side questions and endlessly pointless discussions. The aim, of course, was to tire the opposite side and gain time to mount a counter-attack. Such was the extent of the surprise that Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani kept a deafening silence for 40 days before addressing his troops.

By contrast, the boycotting countries had the advantage of dealing the first blow. In the end, however, they needed more time to cooperate, gather information and coordinate their efforts and positions to come up with the appropriate common response.

This, of course, was and still is the right thing to do in the long run but in the short run, it might constitute a handicap in a fast-evolving crisis. The situation required quick reactions because delays in consultation and coordination might be misconstrued. The four countries understood the stakes and harmonised the general guidelines for their reactions. A look at the performances of each individual country in politics, economics and media shows they are in line with the official recommendations of the coordination meetings.

Qatar finds no better strategy than to continue making a fuss internationally. There was a telling example in the legal complaint Qatar lodged with the World Trade Organisation against Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, claiming that their trade and travel restrictions were "coercive attempts at economic isolation." Qatar also complained to the International Civil Aviation Organisation but to no avail.

Qatar's last attempt at embarrassing its opponents was when it complained to the UN Security Council that Egypt was taking advantage of heading the council's Counter-Terrorism Committee to settle political scores with specific countries. Egypt responded by publishing proof of Qatar's backing of terrorism.

So Qatar is back to square one with the proof that giving the crisis an international dimension is costlier than resolving it at a regional level.

Kuwaiti mediation sees possible breakthrough in Qatar crisis

The Arab Weekly staff

London

Kuwaiti mediators, who appear to be making progress, increased diplomatic efforts to get both sides of the Qatar boycott dispute to agree to face-to-face talks to resolve the row between Qatar and a group of Saudi-led Arab countries.

Gulf sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Kuwaiti mediation efforts could lead to Qatar agreeing to direct talks without the lifting of sanctions first, a precondition set by Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani.

This new flexibility was the result of shuttle diplomacy by Kuwait First Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Khalid al-Sabah and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and Acting Minister of Information Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah al-Mubarak, who visited all the countries involved in the dispute and Oman, another Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member, which has remained neutral.

The sources said Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt want explicit Qatari guarantees, not guarantees from Kuwait or the United States, which has expressed readiness to help. Bahrain, however, has shown more flexibility.

A Saudi official again called out Qatar for its alleged support for extremist groups. Chargé d'Affaires at the Saudi Embassy in Kabul Mishari Alharbi, in an interview on Afghan television, criticised Doha for supporting the Taliban.



Increased efforts. The Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah (R) is received by UAE Vice-President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum before talks about Qatar, last June. (WAM)

"Qatar supports the terrorist groups and it is still providing support for terrorist groups. The Taliban Qatar office is where [terrorist groups] contact their supporters and vice versa. The Taliban has been receiving supplies using the address," Alharbi said.

He said Qatar was the Taliban's main lifeline and expressed concern for the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan while pledging Saudi Arabia's continued support.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) rejected Doha's request to intervene in the dispute, saying the political dimensions of the crisis were outside its domain.

Qatar had asked the ICAO to intervene in June after its GCC neighbours closed their airspace to Qatari flights as part of a sanctions regime.

Bahraini Transportation and Telecommunications Minister Kamal bin Ahmed Mohammed said: "The decisions taken by the [ICAO] confirm the validity of the technical measures adopted by the four concerned countries and affirm the neutrality of the organisation and its adherence to the role for which it was established – to maintain the safety of civil aviation around the world."

The ICAO's decision followed reports in the government-controlled Qatari media that the UN body convinced the UAE and Bahrain to open air routes to Qatari planes, reports denied by both countries.

The UAE's General Civil Aviation Authority said it allowed a Qatari aircraft to use airspace above international waters managed by the UAE, not UAE airspace.

Bahrain's Ministry of Transport

and Telecommunication said all media reports on Bahrain opening its airspace to Qatar Airways were inaccurate, adding that air routes over international waters had been open for all types of air traffic since June 11.

The crisis broke out after statements attributed to Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani criticising US foreign policy and praising Iran were carried by the official Qatar News Agency.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Doha on June 5, saying that Qatar interfered in their countries' internal affairs and supported radical groups such as Hamas, the Taliban and the Muslim Brotherhood. A list of 13 demands issued by the quartet must be met for talks with Doha to commence, the boycotting countries said.

Arab countries move to tackle the Qatari monopoly of sports' broadcast

Ibrahim Ouf

Cairo

The diplomatic crisis with Doha has seen several Arab countries block Qatari satellite channels, including the popular beIN Sports network. Egypt's free-to-air ONTV network, which recently acquired exclusive rights to broadcast Egyptian Premier League and Egypt Cup football matches, said the time was ripe to expand and take over coverage of regional and international sports.

"It is about time this monopoly [by beIN Sports] came to an end," said Seif Zaher, a member of the

ONTV board of directors. "I think some real steps are now being taken to end this monopoly."

Doha-based beIN Sports, a successor to the Al Jazeera Sports network, has been a mainstay in the homes of many football-loving Arabs. Charging viewers \$18 a month for a subscription has allowed beIN to secure exclusive broadcasting rights in the Arab Middle East for major football leagues, including the English Premier League, the Spanish La Liga, the Italian Serie A and the German Bundesliga. This has secured the networks' popularity.

However, the political dispute between Qatar and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in June opened the door for other Arab networks to challenge beIN's stranglehold on sports broadcasts. Doha, which stands accused of financing terrorism, paid hundreds of millions of dollars to acquire exclusive broadcast rights in the Middle East but, given the decision to block broadcasts from Qatar, subscribers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain are unable to watch the games.

"I think the crisis over Qatar's financing of terrorism should motivate other Arab countries into presenting alternatives to beIN to end its domination," said Egyptian sports commentator Essam Shaltout.

There are signs that Saudi, Egyptian and Emirate broadcast networks are seeking to do just that.

Saudi Arabia blocked beIN on June 12. A few days later, Saudi Media City Chairman Muflih al-Hafatah released a plan for the launch of PBS Sports, which he said would be the "largest" sports TV network in the

Arab world. He reassured viewers that PBS Sports would seek to be a free-to-air channel, not a paid subscription service like beIN.

The new network would be operated by professionals from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Iraq, Bahrain, Algeria, Morocco and Libya, Hafatah said.

In the UAE, similar moves have been made to end Qatar's stranglehold on sports broadcasting. Abu Dhabi is expected to demand broadcast rights of the FIFA Club World Cup matches in the Emirates in December, Emirati media reported.

It will also move to prevent the Qatari pay operator from purchasing broadcast rights to the AFC Asian Cup, to take place in 2019 in the UAE.

Egyptian officials have taken concrete action by snatching sports competitions' broadcast rights from the Qataris. The owner of ONTV network, steel production baron Ahmed Abu Hashima, purchased 51% of a major media agency that will look to secure the rights to broadcast international sports events.

In September 2016, the agency, called Presentation Sports, allocated \$750 million and raised another \$450 million to purchase the broadcast rights of the African Cup of Nations through 2028.

However, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) selected French sports

and entertainment agency Lagardere Sports, which has previously sold the broadcast rights to beIN, but whose bid was \$200 million below the Egyptian company's. Presentation Sports was considering legal proceedings against then-CAF President Issa Hayatou, alleging corruption for rejecting the Egyptian company's higher bid.

Presentation Sports is expected later this year to seek broadcasting rights for Italy's Serie A football, having already secured the broadcast rights to the Arab Club Championship, which concluded August 2 in the Egyptian coastal city of Alexandria.

The agency allocated the broadcast rights of the championship to ONTV Sport and Abu Dhabi Sports, both free-to-air channels. The two channels signed a cooperation agreement in November for the free exchange of programmes.

Zaher said the efforts by Egyptian, Saudi and Emirate networks were a promising start to ending beIN's monopolisation of sports broadcasts in the Arab world.

"We know we will face tough challenges to end these monopolies but we are more than capable of doing this," Zaher said. "One network cannot be left to be the only window through which hundreds of millions of people see sports events. This must end."

Ibrahim Ouf is an Egyptian journalist in Cairo.

“We know we will face tough challenges to end these monopolies but we are more than capable of doing this.”



Seif Zaher, ONTV board of directors member

